

Search and Attack

A Doctrinal Perspective

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The doctrine in Field Manual (FM) 100-5 provides commanders with a common approach to wartime operational tasks, and a context in which to view the conduct of operations. Accompanying this doctrine is a series of field manuals that more specifically define procedures and methods for employing units in combat.

These manuals do a good job of covering most combat operations. In training a light infantry rifle company on the movement to contact, however, I had trouble understanding the approach they take in discussing search and attack. I would like to offer a discussion of this issue, along with some practical methods a light infantry leader can use.

Let's first look at the core of the problem. FM 100-5 describes movement to contact as a type of offensive operation:

The purposes of movement to contact are to gain contact with the enemy and to develop the situation. Movements to contact should be conducted in such a manner as to maintain the commander's freedom of action once contact is made.

This is a general description of a type of operation, and one that can be useful in a variety of conditions. At this point, though, FM 100-5 gets very specific in describing a movement to contact: *A corps and its divisions usually organize a covering force, an advance guard, and a main body for movements to contact. The main body normally provides flank and rear security forces.*

Immediately following this passage, the manual describes the organization

and purpose of units that are conducting movement to contact operations. This description raises several questions: Is this general context or common approach useful for the average light infantry division or brigade task force with a contingency mission? Is the operational doctrine too specific? Or is it missing some information?

The answers to these questions are a separate issue worthy of future debate. Yet the results of this kind of doctrine do affect the operational approach to movement to contact that the light infantry field manuals take.

VARIATIONS

FM 7-72, Light Infantry Battalion, offers movement to contact as a type of offensive operation and specifies an operational procedure similar to the description in FM 100-5. Advance guard, main body, and flank and rear security are principal elements of the approach. Variations appear in movement formations—the battalion wedge, battalion vee, and battalion column. This is not the operational approach commonly used in a light infantry battalion when conducting an operation whose purpose is to gain or maintain enemy contact. Enemy tactics and the terrain are rarely suitable for this operational form.

It is in the "technique" section of the manual that a definition of search and attack can be found: *Search and attack is a movement to contact technique*

peculiar to light infantry. This technique is used when the enemy is dispersed throughout an area, when enemy weaknesses cannot be found, or when we want to deny the enemy movement in an area. The manual attempts to focus on the principle "disperse to search and mass to attack." This section also addresses tasks to be accomplished (beyond gaining and maintaining contact), along with control measures and search techniques; employment techniques for the scout, antiarmor, and mortar platoons are also mentioned.

If search and attack is merely a "technique," why does the manual offer more than just search techniques? It also acknowledges the requirement for different control measures and employment considerations for subordinate elements, yet hesitates to call this an operation or to provide a common methodology or approach.

Let's put this operation in context and seek to understand the evolution of search and attack.

The Vietnam War offered a unique operational perspective. The elusive nature of the enemy forced U.S. units to adopt *search and destroy* operations. Units had to find the enemy first, often on his own terms, then systematically destroy him. Maintaining contact with the enemy in the jungle was difficult. Although "search and destroy" was a common operational term, no lasting doctrinal operational changes appeared in print.

Many people recognized this absence of literature, and a few sought to devel-

op a common approach to search and destroy operations. In *The Vietnam Primer, a Critique of U.S. Army Tactics and Command Practices in the Small Combat Unit*, for example, S.L.A. Marshall and David H. Hackworth (then a lieutenant colonel) offered a number of tactical lessons that provided solutions to problems that small unit leaders often faced.

Other situations dictated a different approach to maintaining contact. The term *cordon and search* (coined as a reaction to Viet Cong domination of villages and hamlets) referred to the technique of sealing an area to allow searchers to flush out the enemy. The cordon eliminated the need for pursuit. Enemy soldiers often fled into pre-established American blocking positions and ambush sites.

Some conventional infantry units even restructured their organizations to accommodate changes in their approach to search and destroy operations. For example, in 1969, the 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry, as part of the 9th Infantry Division, created an extremely decentralized organization in response to the enemy threat. The battalion's units operated in widely decentralized formations of platoon size and smaller, normally over a 50-kilometer area of operations. All extraneous equipment was eliminated, and each rifle company was assigned a specific tactical mission.

Operationally, search and destroy proved to be the principal U.S. ground tactic in Vietnam. Although we later changed the name of this operation to *search and attack*, we still refer to it as a *technique* and do not offer leaders a menu of methods to choose from. The quest for a common approach to conducting search and attack operations continues in most infantry companies and platoons.

Meanwhile, the methods outlined below can serve as a useful checklist or they can be added to any infantry tactical notebook or field SOP at platoon and company level. These are methods I learned from my commander, and they have been tested in numerous platoon, company, and task force field training exercises. The overall strength of the

methodology is the grounding in basic tasks that serves as a springboard for future variation and innovation.

The Conventional Method:

- Through an intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), the leader identifies the spots at which he is likely to run into the enemy and ranks these from most likely to least likely.

- He connects the dots and computes an azimuth and a distance from each dot to the next. This becomes his route, and each change of azimuth is a checkpoint (a random route will help confuse the enemy and reduce the likelihood of ambush). Because the leader can quickly identify unit locations, the route and the checkpoints also help prevent casualties from friendly aerial and indirect fire.

- Units move in the traveling, traveling overwatch, or bounding overwatch formations as the terrain and enemy dictate.

USEFUL

The advantages to this method are mass and control. The disadvantages are that the units are slow to clear the entire area of operation; momentum is difficult to maintain with control; and organic mortars are difficult to employ effectively while on the move.

In general, this method is similar to the movement to contact methods advocated in FM 7-72, 7-71, and 7-70. It is particularly useful in fairly open and rolling terrain where units can take full advantage of the ranges and effects of weapons. It is also useful when opposing an enemy who tends to hold ground instead of withdrawing immediately on contact.

To use this method effectively, a unit must fix, flank, or envelop the enemy to finish him off, and then follow up on any remaining resistance.

The Search and Attack Method:

- The leader uses the same IPB procedure as in the conventional method.

- He then identifies a patrol base location and moves to it. The unit correctly occupies the base and designates a drop-off ambush to secure it.

- The leader sends out two-thirds of his unit to search designated areas and leaves one-third in the patrol base. The dispatched elements go to one or more specified locations that the leader's IPB has identified to see if the enemy is there or has been there. Before leaving the patrol base, each sub-element leader briefs the leader on the exact route he is to take, and both leaders coordinate checkpoints. Upon their return, the leaders debrief each other, the patrol base moves to a new location, and two more sub-elements are sent out to patrol—one of the two that have been on patrol and one that has not.

- Upon contact with the enemy, the patrolling units have two choices: If they can defeat the enemy, they attack him; if they cannot defeat him, they call the leader to report, leave someone to watch the target, and return to the patrol base or their link-up site with the parent unit. The unit then devises a plan and attacks the enemy.

This method has several advantages: It covers a large area quickly, maintains a reserve, improves security by moving patrol bases, and offers rest for one-third of the unit. It has two disadvantages: The patrolling unit is smaller, and the enemy is given more time to mass an attack.

This method is particularly useful when operating independently of parent units—specifically, when areas of operation are large. It builds in rest for extended operations. Additionally, aerial resupply and cache points integrate well around projected patrol base locations.

The Quail Method:

- The IPB process is similar to that of the previous methods.

- The leader identifies the suspected enemy location that he will search. He tries to determine which escape or access routes the enemy soldiers are likely to use and dispatches ambush patrols to cover those routes. (Mutually supporting or area ambushes are best.) The leader then uses the remaining maneuver force to flush the enemy into the ambushes. The procedure is repeated from one location to the next. (Maneuver elements and ambush ele-

ments can even rotate tasks.)

The advantages of this method are that it attacks the enemy twice, it includes maneuver and ambush, and it is easy to mask. The disadvantages are that the unit's movement is slowed and it must have extremely detailed intelligence.

This method is useful when operating in familiar terrain. Additionally, it hinges upon the commander's exploitation of accurate intelligence information from all sources.

Each of these methods emphasizes the importance of the leader's IPB process. When time is critical and the area to be searched is large, the leader must be willing to accept risk. Detailed knowledge of the enemy and the terrain reduces the risk; in fact, the selection of a method must take into account the size of the enemy, the type of terrain, and the amount of time available.

Proper command and control is also a prerequisite for success. Solid intent, clear control measures, link-up plans, and primary and alternate communications are critical to resupply, reinforcement, and casualty evacuation operations. Leaders must carefully plan soldier load combinations for each method. Rucksacks are inappropriate for most of the methods, and all plans must include arrangements for resupply or cache retrieval.

Leaders should vary patrolling methods to avoid predictable patterns. At the company level, the commander can and often should mix methods. He (or a platoon leader) may have his three subordinate elements operating in separate areas using different methods. In this situation, the subordinate leaders need to know their own locations and report them accurately. Accurate reporting facilitates control of current operations and provides the basis for future operations.

Training units to standard in each method is a challenge to leaders. An appropriate training strategy should include at least the following multi-echelon training events:

Commander Chalk Talks (platoon and section leaders). These provide a forum for the review of principles and

involve wargaming solutions to tactical problems.

Commander Tactical Exercises Without Troops (TEWTs) (same audience). Before each field exercise, the company commander walks the ground with the unit's leaders and discusses, in a realistic setting, alternatives to the solutions discussed during the chalk talk.

Platoon Sergeant and Squad Leader Rehearsals. This group reviews movement techniques, patrol base occupation methods, ambush techniques, and other supporting tasks. They accomplish this with multiple iterations of "clump rehearsals." In these



rehearsals, squad leaders and platoon sergeants painstakingly lead their elements through rehearsals using a crawl, walk, and run technique. The basic skills are easy to review in local training areas, or even on parade fields if necessary.

Preparation of the Objective. The company executive officer, the engineer support element, and a detail from each platoon build objectives in a training area. The objectives must be appropriate to the task, condition, and standard specified in the ARTEP Mission Training Plan (MTP). The objectives must represent a unique condition that is appropriate to the particular training task. Variety and imagination are important here.

Situational Training Exercises

(STXs). The first four activities can occur separately to save valuable time. The platoon leaders then take their elements to the field to train on these methods in a realistic, familiar setting. The commander facilitates each exercise by managing resources for each element and rotating platoons and squads through force-on-force multiple-integrated laser engagement system (MILES) validation exercises.

Leaders select tasks on the basis of known training weaknesses. For example, the first platoon, known to be weak in area ambush operations, uses a quail method against the second platoon. The second platoon uses a search and attack method and focuses on weaknesses in hasty attack and link-up operations (force ratio considerations must also play a role in exercise design). Meanwhile, the third platoon works on casualty evacuation techniques while moving on a random route such as that used in the conventional method.

After-Action Reviews. At each level of training, and after each training iteration, comprehensive after-action reviews must be conducted to distill the critical lessons and provide feedback before retraining. Leaders must build retraining time into the training schedule and then must limit their task selection to a reasonable number. This will encourage training to the standard.

Light infantry units are likely to continue playing a vital role in the future, and proficiency in conducting search and attack operations will still be a priority. Small unit commanders, armed with a training methodology or common approach, can take over existing doctrine and train their units to conduct movements to contact under varied scenarios, and thus ensure that the infantry force will retain its ability to close with and destroy the enemy.

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